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ABSTRACT

The circumstances in France surrounding the reform of the third and fourth years of university study (the second cycle) are considered. It is suggested that if the original problem stemmed from the expansion of university enrollments and the shortage of graduate jobs, the proposed solution called for vocationally oriented diversification; the issue very quickly became a power struggle between the Secretariat for Higher Education and Research and elements within the universities. To provide a context for these events, some basic information about French higher education is considered. Problem areas that have important ramifications for the university include: the saturation of traditional graduate labor markets, particularly in the public sector; the competitive disadvantage of university graduates in the private industry labor market compared to graduates of "grandes ecoles," where recruitment is by competitive examination; and the finding that jobs that university graduates accept are either provisional, part-time, or below the graduate's level of training and expectation. The underlying objective of the second-cycle reform is to better adapt higher education to the employment opportunities in the economy. Opposition to the reform by the universities centered on reduced access to university programs and student selection criteria; the government's proposed curtailment in the length of study for the license; the challenge to the traditional curriculum; and the increased power over programs provided to the Secretary of Higher Education. One of the consequences of the developments has been devaluation of the university. (SW)

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A RETROSPECTIVE VIEW OF THE SECOND-CYCLE REFORM IN FRANCE

by

Roger L. Geiger*

YALE HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH GROUP
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A RETROSPECTIVE VIEW OF THE SECOND-CYCLE REFORM IN FRANCE*

During the past decade Western European systems of higher education have felt the weight of strong democratic, egalitarian pressure from students, within their teaching corps and in society at large. This pressure has had a powerful influence over three areas of concern: 1) access, 2) structure and 3) governance of higher education (Geiger, 1976). A burgeoning social demand for higher education, combined with explicit government commitments to accommodate all eligible students, has brought each of these systems to the stage of "mass higher education," where more than 15% of each age cohort attains some post-secondary education. And, pressure still exists to continue this expansion, particularly in ways that would increase the participation of less-privileged social groups. The considerable growth of higher education that has occurred has taken place under the structural constraint of maintaining a theoretical equality between institutions and the diplomas they grant. This has been guaranteed externally by political considerations, and internally by the right of all secondary school graduates to pursue university study. Finally, during the late 1960s the demands by students and junior faculty for a greater voice in university governance have produced some degree of university democracy throughout Western Europe. If some of these measures have lately been attenuated, the democratic principle has been firmly established.

Despite substantial continuing support for these egalitarian tendencies, countervailing forces in recent years have assumed surprising prominence, and now threaten in many countries to reverse the direction of this

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recent evolution. The problem of access has begun to be overshadowed by what might be labeled the problem of egress--i.e., the deteriorating employment prospects for those graduating from the university. This has created a clamor for further diversification of the university curriculum through the creation of vocationally relevant programs. Such a change could not avoid replacing the present structure of relatively equal and open units with one where students would be channeled to places within a highly diversified, and consequently stratified, set of institutions. The impasse facing higher education has affected governance as well: the very magnitude of the problems has either invited or necessitated government intervention, thus effectively limiting the scope of decisions made by elected university bodies.

Without elaborating these points further it should be evident that the various Western European systems of higher education presently face at least potential transitional points in their recent evolution. Certainly there can be no doubt that this is the case for France. There the university system was disrupted during most of 1976 by the vigorously contested reform of the third and fourth years of university study (the second cycle). Although rhetoric and ready analysis has been plentiful on this subject, I would like to argue here that the significance of this episode for the future of French universities can be clarified by regarding it as a particular case of the general situation just outlined. For, if the original problem stemmed from the expansion of university enrolments and the shortage of graduate jobs, the proposed solution called for vocationally oriented diversification; and, the issue very quickly became a power struggle between the Secretariat for Higher Education and Research and

elements within the universities (Geiger, 1977). To establish a context for these events, it is first necessary to recall some basic information about French higher education.

The Orientation Law of 1968 established the basis for a complete reorganization of French universities. The rigid and conservative faculties, which had been dominated by the chairholding professors, were abolished completely. In their place a number of different types of "units of teaching and research" (UERs) were organized, and then combined into some 70 multidisciplinary universities. The intention was to create a flexible structure that would be responsive and adaptable to local conditions. To this end the universities were accorded a substantial measure of autonomy under elected presidents. In addition, they were to be democratically run through the participation of students and all levels of faculty in the governing councils. However, this process produced more institutional variegation than functional diversification. Strong pressures for uniformity remained in the system. France was still the most centralized of all the major systems of higher education, with the bulk of important budgetary and personnel decisions being made in Paris. The newly created university presidents, for example, soon found it necessary to organize a Presidents' Conference, so that they could collectively assert their interests in the capital. The counterbalance to the centralized authority of the Ministry was not in the university administration, but in the powerful teachers' unions and student organizations. Their corporate interests, in combination with the imperatives of a centralized administration, have tended to guarantee uniformity between universities in matters of finance, in the treatment of personnel, in the value of national degrees, and in

their accessability for the growing number of bacheliers emerging from secondary schools. The presidents of the autonomous universities, should they genuinely desire to innovate, find themsleves under tremendous constraints, either from the Secretariat "above" them, or from the corporate interests "below"—or from both (Bourricaud, 1976). Considered in this light, the progress they have made is commendable (Fomerand, 1976; below p. 13); however, this latest crisis is sufficient testimony that it has not been nearly adequate.

One of the features of French higher education that the Orientation Law did not touch was the dichotomy between universities—open to all bacheliers—and grandes écoles—where recruitment is by competitive examination (concours). The implicit competition between these two sectors has always worked to the disadvantage of the universities. By monopolizing a good many of the elite functions of higher education, the grandes écoles have depreciated the relative importance of university education. This has also produced a differential social recruitment between the two sectors, with the better grandes écoles attracting a disproportionate share of students from high social backgrounds. This has been largely assured through their access to the preparatory classes which train students for the concours. The very success of the grandes écoles on their own terms (and also those of the government) have made them impervious to change merely for the sake of the welfare of the universities. Thus, an invidious competition has been perpetuated, with consequences that will be apparent below.

In the halcyon days of the 1960s it was widely assumed that mass higher education was a correlate of a technologically advanced society. In this decade it has become increasingly evident that there are limits to the

number and types of highly trained personnel that European societies can assimilate. The recent student riots in Italy have publicized the grotesque proportions of graduate unemployment there. It is nowhere near that bad in France; but nevertheless there have been widely believed charges the last few years that the universities were "manufacturing unemployed." This overreaction at least had the merit of attracting researchers to this problem. Guy Herzlich, the higher education writer for Le Monde, has examined the data on graduate unemployment that has recently become available, and has concluded that the situation is not quite so dire. University study, on the average, still translates rather directly into better jobs and higher pay, even though its advantages seemed to be declining (Herzlich, 1976). However, statistics cannot in this case convey the full reality of the university-labor market relationship. There are at least four problem areas here that have important ramifications for the university.

1. The foremost problem is the saturation of traditional graduate labor markets, particularly in the public sector. While the private sector in France employs three-quarters of the wage-earners in the country, it hired less than one-quarter of the 1970 university graduates; more than two-thirds of the cadres there held non-university diplomas. University graduates have traditionally aimed at jobs in the civil service and especially teaching, but this is no longer possible. The smaller age cohorts now entering the schools, together with the enormous teacher recruitment in the recent past have guaranteed that there will be little demand for new teachers in the foreseeable future. The Ministry of Education announced that there would be 5,600 teaching positions open for 1977--down from 7,800

just two years before (Le Monde, 1/28/77). Moreover, Education Minister René Haby intends in the near future to prerecruit candidates for teacher training after two years of university study, and to strictly limit the number according to projected local needs. When this plan goes into effect it will consummate an abrupt transformation in the French university: within a decade the training of teachers will have slipped from the primary purpose of higher education in letters and sciences to a very marginal component.

2. It has been estimated that in the future private industry will have to absorb two-thirds of the university graduates. However, on these labor markets university products find themselves at a considerable competitive disadvantage to grandes écoles graduates. The latter supposedly have had their intellectual abilities proven by the concours, and have undergone the kind of socialization and practical training most valued in the business world. This discrepancy has tended to produce a market reaction, drawing the more ambitious and able students away from the universities. Since this process is self-validating, the sagging reputation of the university aggravates the relative disadvantage of its graduates, and has become an important factor in its own decline.

3. The actual problem facing university graduates can best be described as difficulty of insertion into the labor market. This means that the jobs they accept are either provisional, part-time, or below the graduate's level of training and expectation. Consequently, many of the recent graduates who are currently employed are in fact still waiting for an appropriate situation. However, a significant percentage of graduates prefer to do their waiting in the university. They enroll for

additional licence degrees, or higher degrees, partly to improve their employment prospects, but also partly to avoid the consequences of leaving the university. This produces a large population of cynical and chronically disgruntled students in the university; and, since each of them is a charge upon the state, they constitute an inefficient use of resources. From the standpoint of the labor market, both the underemployed and those withholding themselves voluntarily from the market represent a backlog of highly trained manpower, for whom there will probably never be a sufficent number of adequate positions.

4. Statistics cannot fully grasp the factors just mentioned; and they are even more limited when it comes to appreciating the contemporary situation. The available data (Herzlich, 1976) pertains more to 1970-73 than to 1974-77. Yet, there can be no doubt that the situation has continued to deteriorate. The attempt to bring university programs more into line with employment prospects--the second-cycle reform of 1976--was more than justified; in fact, it was long overdue.

The reform of the second cycle that was promulgated early in 1976 had actually been in the works since 1973.[1] Its focus was the third and fourth years of university study which lead to the degrees of licence and maîtrise. These degrees represent the aspirations of the majority of those seeking higher education. This is therefore the appropriate level to attempt to articulate the output of the universities with outlets in the labor market.

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[1] Arrêté du 16 janvier 1976: Dispositions relatives au deuxième cycle des études universitaires, Bulletin officiel, no. 4 (1/29/76); and Circulaire no. 76-U-044 du 25 février 1976: Mise en place de la réforme du deuxième cycle, B.O., no. 10 (3/11/76).

The ostensible intention of the reform was that all licence and maîtrise degrees would represent coherent and complete one-year programs in either a discipline, a combination of disciplines or training for a profession. Each degree was to be conceived with a definite end in view, and in that sense was to be sufficient or terminal for a particular level of professional preparation. The provisions of the reform did not specify what these programs would be; their contents were to be entirely determined by the universities. The reform established only the general goal and the procedures to be followed in drawing up the programs.

The universities were instructed to reevaluate critically all existing programs according to the ends of the reform. Those that could meet the criteria proposed were to be restructured into self-contained one-year programs; those without vocational outlets or with few students were expected to be dropped. The universities were also expected to devise new vocationally oriented programs; but since there would be no additional funding, new programs would have to be financed by redeploying existing resources. The conditions of access to these programs were to be defined by the universities, but in general they were envisioned as relatively open for the licence and restrictive for the maîtrise. In fact, it was the Secretariat's intention to control enrolments by "holding the front at the licence." The program descriptions compiled by the universities were then to receive an evaluation from special "technical study groups," comprising from one-third to one-half members from the relevant vocational area, and the remainder from the university. These were intended to gauge the actual market for the credentials being proposed. After a more perfunctory evaluation by the Higher Education Council (CNESER), the programs

would pass to the Secretary for final authorization. If approved, the university proposing the program could offer it for a national degree for five years. Programs refused authorization could theoretically be offered by a university, but the degrees would lack national recognition.

The underlying objective of the second-cycle reform is irreproachable: the Secretariat, faculty, students and the French public largely agree that mass higher education must become better adapted to the employment opportunities in the economy. And, at first sight the proposed procedures seem to be a plausible and promising way to achieve this. When they were promulgated, however, they provoked overwhelming opposition in the universities, from the presidents on down to the students. Strikes closed the majority of the universities in France—some for months—and in April students staged the largest protests since 1968. Specific criticism was sometimes directed at the content of the reform, other times at the way it was presented, and often was purely ideological opposition to the government. Through the shrill charges and countercharges, however, five recurrent themes are discernible.

1. Selection: the students suspected, and quite rightly, that the government was trying to sneak the principle of selection in through the back door. They duly labeled this approach "malthusian and anti-democratic" in ideological faithfulness to past struggles to prevent barriers of selection in university study. This reflex reaction virtually precluded any consideration of the possible benefits that limited selection at advanced levels might have. This form of selection, however, involved a further difficulty. Choosing students on criteria other than the degrees they held would undermine the equality of national degrees. This is a principle

fiercely supported by both students and teachers.

2. Turning the university over to the bosses (patronat): this charge bears the same ideological complexion as the previous one. It stems from a general distaste for capitalism, and also serves to preclude a more pragmatic consideration of the issues. Actually, allowing businessmen to be a minority in the technical study groups would scarcely pervert the university to their rapacious purposes. The truth is that university graduates need French business far more than the patrons need the university. Any measure that would diminish the enormous gulf between the two would be welcome under the present circumstances.

3. Depreciation of the licence: there can be little doubt that this is a matter of personal concern to students, and that it menaced them in three different ways. The government's proposal represented a definite curtailment in the length of study. Even though the licence is theoretically a one-year degree, the average length of study is more like three years. Forcing the program into a single year would either increase the difficulty of the degree or cheapen its value. From another perspective, defining the licence as a vocational and terminal program would demean what cultural prestige the degree still retains. Finally, this depreciation would be combined with selection, thus eliminating the possibility for many students to pursue their studies beyond the licence.

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[2] Despite the aversion to selection, limitations on enrolments often become inescapable. In the Fall of 1977 Parisian first-year students will be allowed to enroll at any of the area's universities--but only until the allotted spaces are filled. This will not be selection by academic qualifications, but what Le Monde calls selection by motorbike, since prospective students may have to race around the city in search of a university opening.

4. Challenge to the traditional curriculum: the professionalization of the university proposed by the reform portended no less than a revolution in the curriculum. Faculty were faced with radically revising their offerings, or perhaps seeing their courses eliminated entirely as non-marketable. They were naturally alarmed. The dominant unions of both the junior faculty (SNESup.) and the senior faculty (Féderation nationale des syndicats autonomes de l'enseignement supérieur) condemned the reform on these grounds, and insisted upon the maintenance of existing programs.

5. Aggrandizement of the Secretary of Higher Education: although the language of the reform stressed the autonomy of the universities in devising programs, it actually imposed the responsibility for the reform on the universities, while the authority over them was retained by the Secretary. This constituted a significant extension of the Secretary's power. At present the authorization for degrees is permanent, and is only revoked under extreme circumstances (this has occurred only three times). The reform would require an initial authorization of each program, and a renewal every five years. This would be a clear loss for the universities. The significance of this issue is magnified by the distrust existing between the current Secretary, Alice Saunier-Seité, and the universities. She has been justifiably accused of using her power to reward "good" universities that support the government, and punishing "bad" ones dominated by the Left. There is consequently widespread reluctance to furnishing her with another set of weapons in this ongoing struggle.

Perhaps there is reason to add an additional item to this list, even though it forms an element of each of the preceding five: that would be

uncertainty. The lack of precise definition in the terms of the reform, together with uncertainty about its consequences aggravated the fears of those whom it would affect. Opponents of the reform consequently demanded clarification; but, clarification would limit the freedom of action of both the universities and the Secretariat. On the most controversial points, like the criteria to be used to authorize programs, full revelation would either make the painful consequences of the reform evident, or dilute its content before it was ever implemented. In actuality, the latter course was forced upon the Secretary.

In late June, 1977, nearly eighteen months after the second-cycle reform was promulgated, the National Assembly and the Senate made these decrees offical laws of the Fifth French Republic. This assured their implementation during the next two academic years (1977-79).[3] However, the impact that this will have on French universities can only be slight as a result of some strategic concessions forced upon the Secretary for Higher Education and Research. Foremost among these was the assurance that present programs offering fundamental training in a discipline would be automatically authorized to continue. This obliterated in one stroke the possibility of a curricular revolution or the professionalization of the university. It consequently left no redeployable resources that could

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[3] Journal officiel, 1 juillet 1977. This legislative validation precluded a judicial challenge to the second-cycle reform then pending before the Conseil d'Etat. Student and teacher groups had contended that the technical study groups and the authorizations controlled by the Secretary violated the autonomy of universities established in the Orientation Law of 1968. Also, they argued that selection to licence or maîtrise programs violated the equality of national degrees between universities. (Le Monde, 7/2/77).

be diverted to new programs. It has also become clear that the technical study groups will be largely a window dressing, with no significant influence over the content of degree programs (Le Monde, 4/27/77). Accompanying these changes has been a change in the posture of the Secretary. Alice Saunier-Seité apparently no longer believes, as she did in the spring of 1976, that there are too many students in the university. The official position now is that disinterested university study for cultural enrichment should be available to all those qualified to benefit from it. This still leaves open the possibility of selection in vocationally oriented programs--a principle well established in the grandes écoles. In all likelihood the implementation of the second-cycle reform will have far less impact on French universities than its promulgation did in 1976. This is consequently not an inappropriate time to offer a post-mortem on this still future reform.

One might first question the underlying wisdom of the reform. In doing so, it is important to realize that in 1976 there were already more than 150 programs of the type envisioned by the reform, and that they were enrolling approximately 10,000 students (Le Monde de l'Education, October, 1976). They range from applied sciences and applied foreign languages to such specialties as public relations and international tourism (at Rennes II). It must also be remembered that the labor markets

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[4] This concession was made rather subtly, so that the student opposition in particular did not perceive it as a major victory. The over-inflated ideological significance placed on this struggle also, no doubt, obscured the practical importance of the Secretary's "clarification." As a result, the student strikes subsided in a mood of defeat. This feeling was strengthened when the Secretary imposed what were considered harsh terms for the completion of an accredited school year.

available to the universities are circumscribed by the fact that most forms of engineering and administration are monopolized by the grandes écoles. In this light, how realistic was it to expect that the pattern of these applied degrees could be imposed upon all of the second-cycle programs in Letters, Sciences and Economics?

One of the presumed benefits of centralization is that it makes rational planning possible. Theoretically it would have been possible for the Secretariat to make some estimation of demands for highly trained manpower, and provide this information to the universities for guidance. Instead, after four years of haggling, it produced a reform that placed the entire responsibility on the individual universities. Thus, there was no way of knowing if the task demanded of them lay within the realm of possibility. This situation would be tolerable if the purpose of the reform was merely to accelerate an evolution toward vocational programs; however, the reform claimed much more.

In the final analysis, the extravagant claims of the reform bring suspicion upon the good faith of the Secretariat in proposing it. The injunction to winnow existing programs seemed more likely to alienate university teachers than to elicit their cooperation. The financial terms of the reform, which demanded new programs without new funds, also appeared to be unrealistic. These considerations could be construed as designed to placate opinion outside the universities, at the expense of maximizing opposition to the reform within them. Whether or not this was the Secretary's intention, this may have been the only success of the second-cycle reform. By demanding that the universities produce employable graduates the Secretary made the university opposition, the

prolonged strikes and the rhetoric of the student left all appear irresponsible. This had the effect of defusing higher education as an issue that could hurt the present government. This public relations victory, however, was achieved at a high price. Four years of momentum toward reform have been squandered, and the institutional barriers to meaningful structural change appear more insuperable than ever. Now the consequences of non-reform are becoming increasingly apparent.

These consequences can be best summarized as the devaluation of the university. That this has taken place is evident in the actions of students, faculty and the government. A recent study has argued that the declining value of university degrees has affected student attitudes toward their studies (Lévy-Garboua, 1976). Although students are prolonging their schooling more than ever, especially by working part-time, they are devoting less of their time and effort to university study. Degrees remain important, but there is growing cynicism about their contents. This cynicism was particularly evident in the aftermath of the strikes, as the universities scrambled to assure that they would receive full credit for their abbreviated year's work. A case has also been made that the commitment of the faculty to the university has been diminishing. With the esteem of the university at low ebb, and with their own careers determined more by seniority than by scholarly achievements, many teachers are apparently withdrawing their intellectual commitments from their teaching and from their disciplines. They are seeking recognition and gratification instead from external constituencies (Boudon, 1977). Should this prove to be the dominant trend, it could conceivably undermine the intellectual stature of the university—its major remaining source of prestige.

Certainly the most tangible aspect of this devaluation is the current government policy toward the universities. The 1976 rentrée brought austerity budgets and exhortations for more efficient internal management. The most painful blow was an 18% reduction in the credits available for part-time teachers which significantly reduced the number of classes taught in many universities. Overall, university budgets have lagged behind inflation sufficiently to equal a 20% reduction of support since 1973. The collapse of the second-cycle reform and the continued retrenchment forced upon the universities have produced widespread charges that the government has abandoned the universities—that they are being allowed to sink into irreversible mediocrity. After the second-cycle crisis diminished, two important educational administrators resigned, protesting that the government had no policy for the universities. Jean-Louis Quermonne, who wrote the text of the second-cycle reform, charged that nothing was being done to surmount the pervasive problems facing the universities; André Casadevall, who inspired the most successful of the university's vocational programs (the maîtrises de sciences et techniques), felt that the government had not only given up all thought of renovating the universities, but was actively hostile toward them (Le Monde de l'Education, October, 1976). The pessimism of these statements is fully reflected in the current mood on campus. If in the 1976 protests one could detect at least an element of hope, despair and resignation have dominated the universities since (cf. Richardot, 1977).

It remains to relate this episode to the three issues mentioned at the outset. The devaluation of the university will undoubtedly have a

socially differential impact. The constituency of the university today is drawn heavily from the middle and lower-middle classes, while perhaps one of every five students is from the working class. For most of these students university study represents an opportunity for social advancement. Insofar as the depreciation of university degrees falsifies these expectations, it falsifies as well the self-image of France as an open and meritocratic society. This is perhaps the best argument for a government policy to reverse the current trend, so that access to higher education would represent a real opportunity for social betterment. Unfortunately, conditions do not yet seem ripe for such a commitment.

It seems likely, nevertheless, that the previous movement toward diversification and vocational relevance will slowly proceed, propelled in this case by forces within the universities. It must for the time being, however, coexist with forces that are reinforcing the equality between institutions. Recent funding patterns have favored weaker institutions, at the expense of the strong, particularly in Paris, even though a good case can be made that the university system has been overextended. In matters of personnel, decreased movement between institutions and strong union pressures for job security have the potential to equalize faculty quality between institutions (cf. Conia, 1976). Homogenization of the universities in this respect could only occur at the expense of the more prestigious universities, thus further aggravating the general decline.

In recent years the government has been largely successful in imposing major reforms against the opposition of student groups and faculty unions. In 1971 selection was established in medical studies; 1972 saw the creation of a new pattern of teacher education; and in 1973 the first cycle was

transformed. The compromise settlement of the second-cycle reform represents a stand-off that left both sides substantially dissatisfied. At the moment the Secretariat has neither the financial resources nor the political backing of the beleaguered President to undertake any further efforts at significant reform. Student activists appear somewhat chastened after the 1976 strikes, their exertions having been far out of proportion to their rather dubious gains. The present situation, nevertheless, bears less resemblance to a traditional French bureaucratic stalemate than it does to political cold war. Both the Secretary for Universities and her opponents in student and teacher organizations have been venting their frustrations in kind of verbal warfare. Alice Saunier-Seïté regards herself as "the most insulted woman in France"; yet she has become notorious for her own ripostes against the Left.

Behind this war of words, however, the government still possesses considerable administrative powers. It seems to be the Secretary's policy to use them selectively in order to encourage the universities to evolve in certain directions. The Secretariat has on occasion transferred units to ideologically more congenial locations. It has also become adept at making the limited autonomy of the universities work against them. Thus, the universities have been given the responsibility to determine where to cut their shrinking budgets, and they are now being forced to rationalize their own administrations. It is doubtful, nevertheless, that such limited measures will produce the desired evolution of the entire system. This type of progress is only achieved at the expense of generating resentment in the universities. These ill-feelings may in the long run prevent the cooperation between the Secretary and the

universities which is needed to broach the fundamental problems behind the perpetual crisis in French higher education.

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